

Chooch the Squirrel

Bittie Mithal

Illustrations

Partha Sengupta

For Nadiya

ISBN 978-81-237-5708-7

First Edition 2010 (*Saka* 1931)

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Rs. 25.00

Published by the Director, National Book Trust, India
Nehru Bhawan, 5 Institutional Area, Phase-II
Vasant Kunj, New Delhi - 110070

Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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This was long ago, when I was in a boarding school. The exams were over and in two days time the summer break would begin.

I was already looking forward to the journey back home. Home, where the days would be filled with friends and fun and lots of delicious food made by our Goan cook.

No bell would wake you at six in the morning to trundle off to P.T. followed by a hurried breakfast, assembly, classes, lunch, games, homework.... There would be plenty of time to sleep or just do nothing! In the last two days we were left to amuse ourselves as there were no classes.

I decided to explore the garden behind our hostel as someone had said you could find garnets in the soil.



I saw the gardener's son hiding something in a tiny box. Every now and then he would open the box, touch something gently and close the box again. On questioning, it turned out that he had a baby squirrel!

I asked him if I could hold it for a second. He agreed and placed it on my palm. It was practically weightless, a little bit of flesh surrounded by the softest fur in the world. I felt very protective towards it and soon wanted to acquire it to keep as my very personal pet.

Hesitantly I asked if he would like to sell the squirrel to me. I didn't think he would part with such a lovely pet but to my surprise he agreed. Pocketed the money I gave him and disappeared.







I was overjoyed and for a long time kept looking at it on my open palm, afraid to close the fist lest I hurt the little thing. Finally, I moved it to my shirt pocket where it seemed quite comfortable and we walked back to the dormitory.

Now my top priority was to find proper accommodation for the little fellow. I remembered a discarded shoebox lying on top of the bookshelf. I took it, lined it with old socks, some cotton wool, green grass and

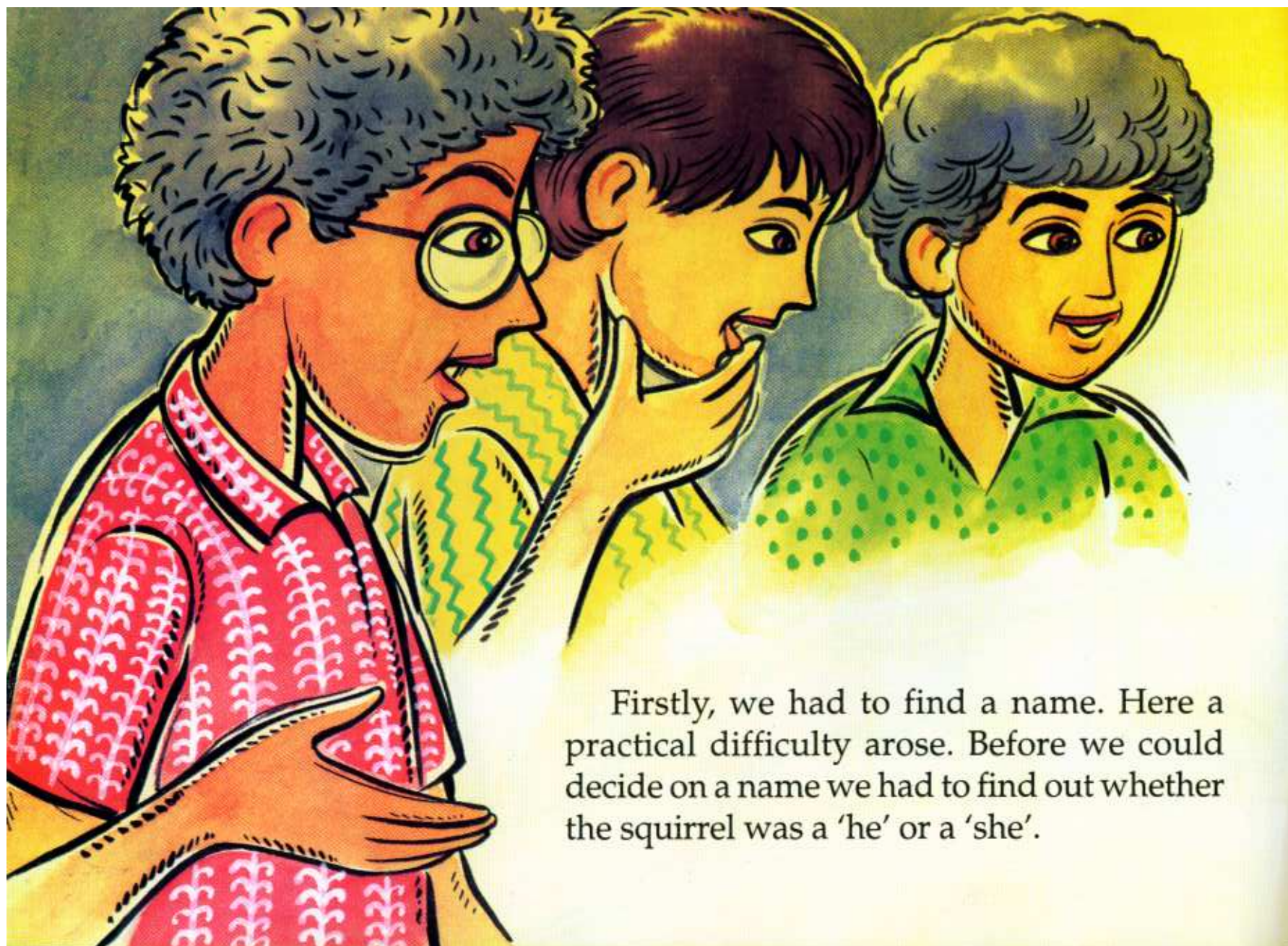


leaves. Some holes had to be made in the lid for air. Finally, the baby squirrel was installed in his new abode. There was an unfinished packet of biscuits in my locker so I put one in the shoebox hoping the squirrel would like it.

There was great excitement in the dormitory. Everyone was curious to know what was in the shoebox, how I had acquired a squirrel, had I caught it or taken it from its nest, what was I going to feed it on, what I was going to name it! The baby squirrel became an instant universal pet. Everyone wanted to contribute ideas on what to do and how to do!







Firstly, we had to find a name. Here a practical difficulty arose. Before we could decide on a name we had to find out whether the squirrel was a 'he' or a 'she'.



We tried our best but could not resolve the problem. The general consensus was that we should assume that the squirrel was a 'he' and name it accordingly.

Many names were suggested. Some like Cuddles, Softy and Fluff but all sounded trivial for this wonderful squirrel. So we went to the other extreme and came up with the name 'Shri Gangadharan Jagannathan Choogh'. The name seemed just right. But it proved too unwieldy and soon he became a simple 'Choogh'.

On his first evening in the dormitory, Choogh sat in my shirt pocket all the time. He seemed happy and content. Most of the time he was asleep, for only occasionally could I feel his claws scratching the shirt material.

Before retiring for the night I fed him some more biscuit and gave water with a dropper.





Afraid of crushing him in my sleep I returned him to the shoebox and secured the lid with rubber bands.

The next day was spent in working out the Choogh diet. We all tried various things but found that he liked almonds, walnuts, biscuits and dry toast.

In the evening we went to board the train and so adequate provisions were made for his meals and he was placed in the shoebox for the overnight journey. He seemed to find the box quite comfortable for each time I peeped in, he lay curled under the cotton wool.







We reached Delhi in the early hours of the morning. The platform was full of parents waiting to receive their wards. My parents were there too. They looked suspiciously at the shoebox I was clutching and refused to part with. Their suspicions were allayed when they found it was a little squirrel. They also started taking interest in its welfare. Very soon Choogh became a part of the household.

All friends and cousins were introduced to Choogh. Some wanted to hold him and I would place him on the palm with instructions about not closing the fist. Choogh was happy to be in the shirt pocket but as he grew in size, the shirt pocket appeared too small for him. His body filled out, the fur became thicker and the tail long and magnificent. On his back there were three stripes running from head to tail. Legend has it that Lord Rama once caressed a squirrel and his fingers left these stripes on the back of all of them.

I discovered that Choogh was happy to be inside my shirt where there was more freedom of movement. He would climb up to reach the neck and ear, and then try to nibble the earlobe. His feet, which were initially ticklish, now began to scratch the skin gently.

We developed a great companionship. He would sit on my desk while I played around with my computer. Choogh also discovered that when inside

my shirt, if he went anti-clockwise he could not come out as the button baulked him! On the other hand if he went clockwise he could emerge from between the shirt buttons. Choogh's acceptance of my Dad was remarkable. Choogh would sit on the corner of the tea trolley and nibble at the sugar crystals offered to him by my Dad.

Choogh was free during the day to sit at my desk or get inside my shirt or climb up the curtain, but at night he buried himself under the cotton wool inside his shoebox.

Later that summer, my parents decided to spend some time in Bombay. I didn't know what to do with Choogh. My parents first suggested I leave him behind, but I didn't want to be separated from him. So, after much discussion, we decided to take him with us. My mother decided that his old shoe box would serve to carry him again, but it needed improvements. So we took it out and cleaned it. We lined it with fresh clean cotton wool. My mother then added both a small container of food and a little bottle of water with a rubber cap. She made a small hole in the cap so that water slowly oozed out. Choogh seemed quite happy with this arrangement. I was concerned that he wouldn't like the travel, and wouldn't like the new house, but I need not have worried. Choogh slept through most of the journey, and only when we were getting



close to our destination in Bombay did he show an interest in his surroundings.

The journey concluded safely and we went to a place near the Hanging Gardens. The building was surrounded by big old trees with spreading branches and sprawling lawns. It gave the feel of a garden.

The trees were bustling with different kinds of birds, squirrels, ants, bees and monkeys too! The apartment we were to stay in was large. My brother and I shared a huge bedroom with a massive wardrobe where Choogh's shoebox was installed.

Hearing about Choogh, one of my cousins invited us over for tea. She was very excited as she had kept a squirrel as a pet when she was in school. Choogh got royal treatment at her house. A special place was laid out for him on a little table and he had a small plate all to himself. He was served almonds, walnuts, dry toast and sugar cubes. Choogh really enjoyed himself and we left promising to return another day.





Panic struck the very next day. Choogh had disappeared! I had put his shoebox in my wardrobe and closed the door. The box was empty and there was no sign of Choogh anywhere. I searched in the cupboard, the folds of the curtain amongst the shoes, every place I could think of but he was nowhere to be found. Seeing my distress everybody got into the act



and searched every nook and corner but to no avail. I was very upset but there was nothing I could do. The apartment was so large and Choogh so tiny. What would he do for his food? With so many cats roaming around how could he be safe? I felt frustrated and angry with myself. Why had I not closed the box more securely?



By the next day I was convinced that Choogh was lost forever and I just would have to reconcile to the idea. We were to go to the club for a swim and late breakfast. I rummaged in the cupboard to pull out some clothes and swimming trunks. I took out a bright shirt, which I thought would lift my mood. Lo and behold! There was Choogh curled up on a shirt. I screamed to my brother, "Choogh is right here, asleep in the cupboard." I was ecstatic. I lifted him up gently, caressed him and tried to convey to him how much he had been missed.









So, life fell back to its old pattern. I became very complacent as every time I came home I found Choogh in some part of the cupboard.

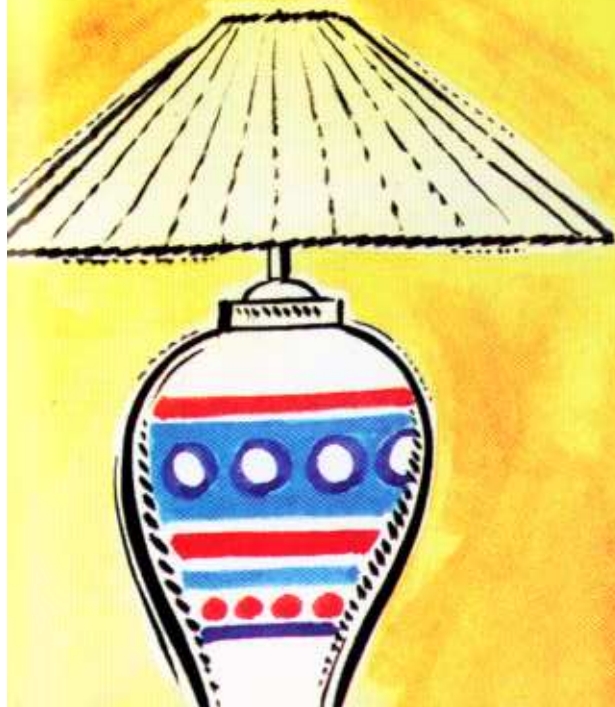
The tree next to the house was flourishing and its branches almost touched the windows. Some of the branches had berry like fruit. Squirrels could be seen climbing up and down. Their sounds could be heard all over the house. A variety of birds feasted on the berries.



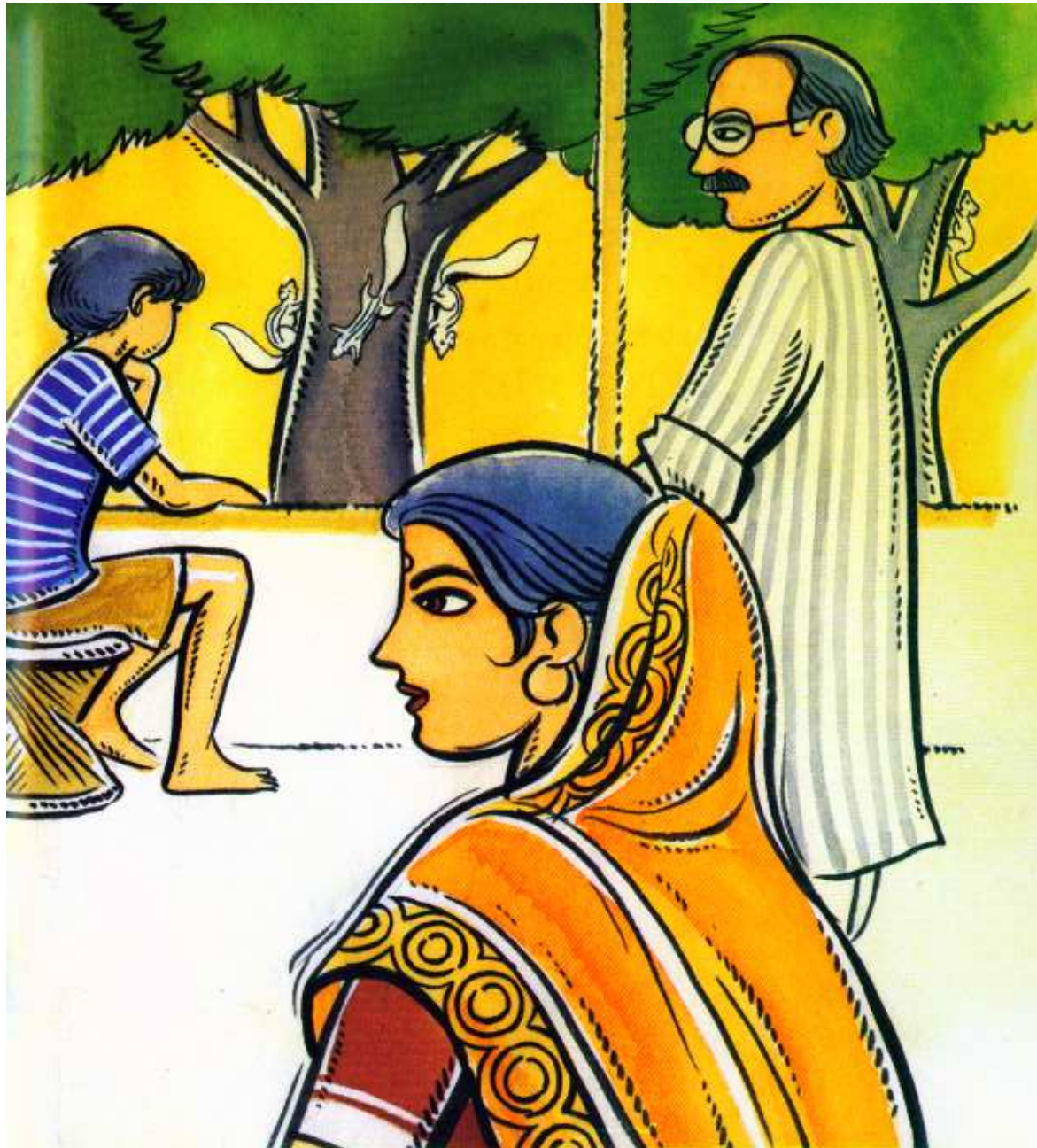


One day, I went for my swim after placing Choogh in the cupboard. On return I found the shoebox empty. 'Again he has climbed out and hidden himself in my clothes,' I thought and picked each garment carefully expecting to find Choogh snoring in the folds. Soon I came to the bottom of the pile and Choogh was nowhere.

'He has found a new hiding place,' I thought and searched more vigorously and systematically. By now I was getting a bit anxious and alarmed enough to enlist the help of my brother. Together we scoured the cupboard, the room and then the whole house, but, alas, met with failure!





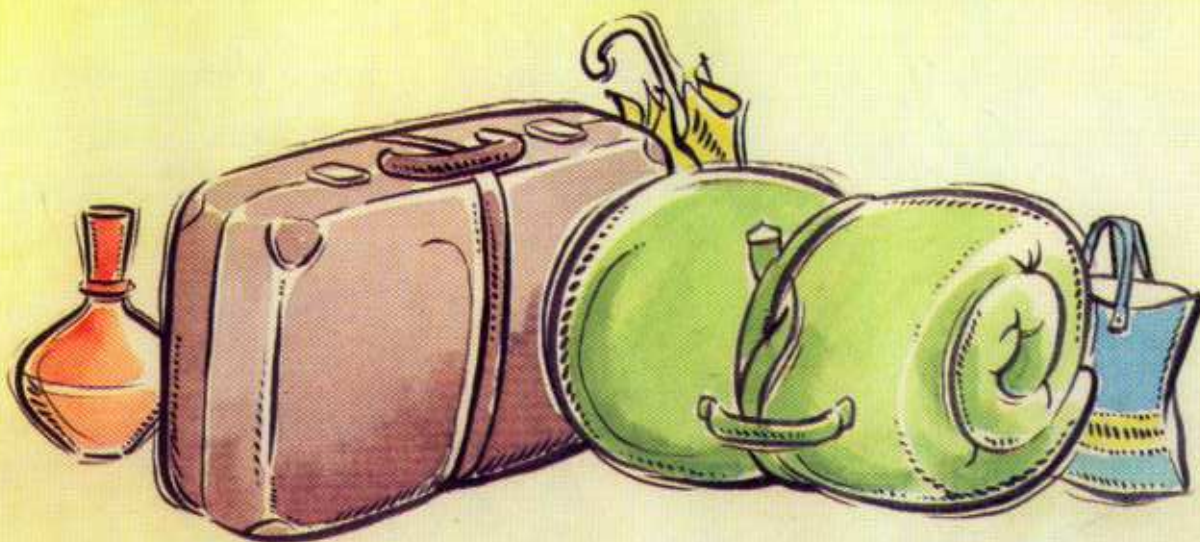


Finally the domestic staff and the parents were all persuaded to join in the search but Choogh was nowhere to be found. The old cook wisely said, "Baba, don't be sad. Choogh must have joined his clan on the tree." This seemed like an outrageous notion to me. I could not cope with the idea of losing Choogh but could not find him either.

Slowly the days passed by and each day I kept hoping that Choogh would return. At last, we had to return to Delhi and still no sign of Choogh. Then a thought struck me; perhaps the cook was right; perhaps Choogh had been lured away by all that scurrying and chirruping on the tree!

And I began to wonder if Choogh was after all really a 'she' and not a 'he'. There surely was a lot more activity on the tree. More running and chasing up and down the branches. I realised that the squirrel clan in the tree would have welcomed Choogh.

I missed our time together, but Choogh was home!



Lasertypeset by Capital Creations, New Delhi and printed at Bengal Offset Works, New Delhi



Rs 25.00

ISBN 978-81-237-5708-7

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